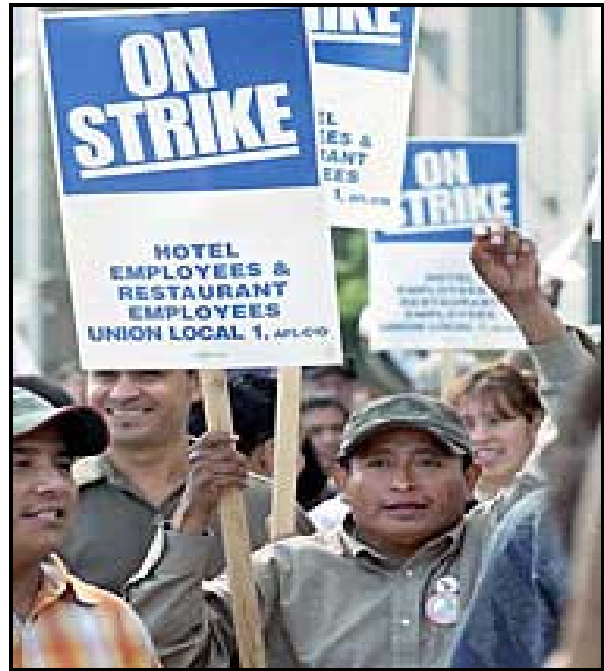


Split in the AFL-CIO?

A Look at the Present Debate About Reorganizing the AFL-CIO

by Jeff Mackler, National Secretary of Socialist Action



When one of the AFL-CIO's largest and fastest growing affiliates, the 1.7-million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU), threatens to leave the crumbling "house of labor," one would think that the issues in dispute and the measures proposed to heal the breach were substantial. Sadly, as we will demonstrate, nothing could be further from the truth.

Today's AFL-CIO represents 8.2 percent of the private sector workforce, the lowest level of unionization since 1901. The percentage rises to 12 percent if public sector union members are included. In contrast, 35 percent of U.S. workers were union members in 1954, when the AFL and CIO merged to form the present national federation.

SEIU's president, Andrew Stern, has taken his case to "reform" the AFL-CIO to a wider audience than the usual closed-door meetings of the top officialdom. The SEIU's "10-point plan" has been widely disseminated through the union's website and a slick brochure.

Key elements of the plan include amassing a \$2 billion war chest for union organizing AND union mergers and consolidations over the next five years. This impressive sum is to be raised from a few of the "lead" AFL-CIO affiliates, presumably the largest unions like SEIU and the IBT (International Brotherhood of Teamsters), withholding 50 percent of their annual dues to the national federation, a move that AFL-CIO president John Sweeney says could "hobble" his organization.

"Those [lead] unions' plans," according to the SEIU, "must include using at least 10% of their national union revenue for organizing and uniting more workers in their particular industry, sector, or craft by 2006, 15% in 2008, and at least 20% beginning in 2010.

Their local unions would have to be using at least 10% of their income for this purpose by 2008 and at least 15% by 2010."

"Uniting more workers," as quoted above, seems to be the SEIU's euphemism for forced consolidation. Part of the \$2 billion appears to be destined for paying the salaries of the officials of the "consolidated" unions.

Indeed, the SEIU's proposal has some teeth written into it on this subject. "In consultation with the affected workers," the SEIU proposal states, "the AFL-CIO should have the authority to require coordinated bargaining and to merge or revoke union charters, transfer responsibilities to unions for whom that industry or craft is their primary area of strength, and prevent any merger that would further divide workers' strength."

Andrew Stern (who is joined, at least in part, in his critique of the AFL-CIO by the James Hoffa Jr. leadership of the Teamsters as well as by the leadership of the consolidated hotel and garment trades union, UNITE-HERE) also proposes to increase the amount spent on politics, that is, on electing labor's enemies in the Democratic Party to public office. The SEIU spent \$45 million to elect John Kerry in the last presidential contest while the AFL-CIO spent a mere \$35 million!

Merging the AFL-CIO's 65 national affiliates into 15 larger bodies, according to the SEIU, would supposedly result in further savings as well as larger unions that have greater clout.

The SEIU report argues: "Only 15 of the 65 AFL-CIO national unions have more than 250,000 members and 40 have less than 100,000. Many of these unions, even with good leadership, do not have the strength to unite more workers in their industry and change workers' lives."

An additional \$25 million is to be raised for a campaign to pressure (the proposal does not include the word "organize") the world's largest corporation, Wal-Mart, and other low-wage corporations to raise wages and increase benefits. The SEIU plan does not include a fight to unionize Wal-Mart. The funds for this campaign, presumably a "corporate campaign" effort to embarrass Wal-Mart and others into making some concessions, are to come from the profits derived from the AFL-CIO's Union Plus credit card, according to the SEIU. They would

then be allocated to the establishment of a "center" to "provide good jobs in America."

The SEIU plan is replete with vague proposals for winning national health care and for rewriting labor legislation. "The laws protecting worker choice [the right to join a union without employer or government intimidation] were created over 70 years ago and need to be modernized for the 21st century," the proposal states. But no specific actions are listed in these areas.

Presumably, this will be tossed into the AFL-CIO's "legislative agenda" for its lobbyists to pursue with the help of "labor's friends" in the Democratic Party.

Labor tops offer "voluntary concessions" The Stern proposals, however modest, ineffective, and bureaucratic, represent the second time in recent decades that the deepening and unceasing ruling-class attacks on workers have forced the door open for a necessary discussion and debate inside the AFL-CIO.

The first time was 15 years ago, and was largely limited to the top echelons of the bureaucracy. At that time, then SEIU President Sweeney himself joined with the United Mineworker's Richard Trumka to challenge and replace the bankrupt AFL-CIO leadership then headed by the ailing old-guard labor skate, Lane Kirkland. This brought no changes in the bureaucracy's basic strategy, which consisted in tying labor's future to the prosperity of American capitalism as opposed to its foreign competitors.

When the U.S. bosses fell on international hard times, America's labor lieutenants of the capitalist status quo were there to offer "voluntary concessions" until such time, they swore, as the bosses recovered. Of course, they never have recovered and neither has the labor movement. The number of strikes called by AFL-CIO affiliates over the past decade has fallen to historic lows, perhaps one of the best indices of the orientation of the AFL-CIO's new leadership.

Relying on one of the boss's parties, the Democrats, to champion labor's interests also remained the AFL-CIO's credo. The result was

an accelerated loss of members and an unprecedented decline in the living standards of all workers. The simple notion that workers should have their own party was excluded from AFL-CIO consideration.

The ruling-class offensive against working people began in earnest in the 1970s, when U.S. imperialism's preeminent position in the world economy began to be challenged by a rebuilt and technologically sophisticated European and Japanese capitalism.

In the face of a newly competitive and globalized world marketplace, the U.S. corporate elite and their government did not reject any tactic to stabilize their suddenly declining profit rates—from the Nixon-era wage freeze and wage controls to the massive introduction of multi-tier wage levels in the 1990s.

"Balkanization" of union bargaining power by encroachments on regional, national, and even industry-wide bargaining in major industries (construction, manufacturing, and transport) became the norm, giving additional advantage to the employers. Union-busting open-shop tactics like double-breasting or two-gateing also aided in the decimation of the previously well-organized construction trades.

Today the Bush administration threatens to eliminate unions outright for some 800,000 federal workers, making President Reagan's firing of 11,000 air-traffic-control workers look like child's play.

All this takes place in the context of ongoing threats of plant closures coupled with runaway shops. Initially, the relocation of U.S. industry was to the largely non-union Southern states and Mexico. Today the move is to China, where hourly wage levels of six cents in some industries, enforced by the Chinese pro-capitalist government, increasingly attract America's leading manufacturers.

In the past three years, the "official" net loss in U.S. jobs was one million. But this includes a loss of three million well-paid, often union, jobs in manufacturing while two million jobs were gained, if the official figures are accurate,

mainly in the low-paid, non-union service sector. One-third of the latter were part-time, usually with no benefits.

With the ongoing and historic corruption associated with leading corporations, hundreds of billions have been looted from previously "untouchable" worker pension funds. From the scandals that began with the 1980s Savings and Loan debacle that cost depositors an estimated \$1 trillion to today's Enron, Worldcom, Citicorp, HealthSouth, Salomon, Merrill Lynch, Tyco, Arthur Anderson, Quest, and Marsh & Melman scandals and/or bankruptcies, workers have taken the brunt of the losses.

Defeats and betrayals

What has been the AFL-CIO's response to capital's unrestrained offensive against working people? The federation's declining numbers speak a truth that cannot be denied. The past 35 years evidences a string of virtually uninterrupted defeats. Almost every attack has been left unanswered.

In one of the rare exceptions, the 1985-86 year-long strike led by United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) Local P-9 in Austin, Minn., the militant packinghouse workers were not only deserted by their national federation and the rest of the labor movement but undermined, cut off financially, and abandoned.

P-9 workers were placed in receivership by the pro-employer union tops, who saw a class-struggle challenge to the bosses as a challenge to their class-collaborationist policies.

When the UFCW hierarchy negotiated a terrible concessionary contract with the industry's corporate big wigs, its local affiliates were expected to follow suit. When P-9 struck out on its own to fight to maintain what they had, they faced the wrath of the entire national union bureaucracy, who ordered all their affiliates to refrain from extending the beleaguered P-9 fighters any support.

When the top union leadership itself takes the class-struggle road, again in rare instances such as the 1997 United Parcel Service strike led by IBT President Ron Carey, the government steps

in to deliver the crushing blow that the AFL-CIO bureaucracy itself can not impart.

Carey was removed from the IBT presidency by government fiat and frame-up. Years later, following a long court battle, he was cleared of any wrongdoing. But the government-controlled Teamsters effectively kept him out of office permanently.

It should be said that Carey himself, despite his militancy and honesty, declined to challenge the government's move against him. He quietly abided by their decision to remove him, thereby ending his labor career.

An accurate summary of the past three and half decades? While trillions have been looted from worker's pockets, not a single national union has stood up to the bosses' offensive and scored a resounding victory, not even an important victory.

The fact that today it takes more than two workers in a family to live as well as one in the previous generation essentially means that the bosses have most all of us working for half of what our parents did.

Indeed the real figures show that we have lost MORE than half of the real value of our wages and benefits.

Andrew Stern's proposed \$2 billion "organizing" drive and union consolidation schemes are supposedly designed to counter the present downhill trend. But Stern's views and practice differ little from labor's current practice—that is, top-down business unionism, subordination to the Democratic Party, raiding other unions, or painstaking signature drives to trigger union elections, more than two-thirds of which are lost.

Acceptance of the established NLRB election rules, twisted and distorted by a myriad of government regulations and court decisions that give the employers near unlimited advantages, guarantees failure in advance. The problem lies qualitatively less in reactionary labor legislation than it does in a bankrupt union leadership that has never led a major battle against the class enemy and never intends to.

American labor achieved its greatest success at a time when collective bargaining itself—not to mention union recognition, strikes, fringe benefits, seniority and all the rest—were either non-existent or illegal.

During labor's finest decades in the 1930s and 1940s, court injunctions were routinely disregarded while strikers reached out to the entire labor movement for support—and got it. Solidarity, militancy, mass action, industry-wide strikes, union democracy, and class-struggle tactics were the methods that brought the bosses to heel.

Need for a fighting leadership

The trade-union movement today, despite its composition, small size and structural defects, retains the power to deliver major blows to counter the employer/government offensive and win. The SEIU's proposals center on the totally flawed notion that the solution to labor's plight rests on a restructuring of the existing labor movement wherein all unions in the same industry or trade would be consolidated in the same national union.

Or perhaps it lies, as Stern maintains, in a paucity of organizing funds? Even after a half decade, the SEIU's proposals would allocate no more than 20 percent of the lead unions' revenues to organizing AND consolidation. One can only wonder what the remaining 80 percent of members' dues are spent on.

In fact, labor's problems are not caused by a lack of funds or structural defects. They are a product of the total absence of a fighting leadership and democratic rank-and-file control in the entire labor movement.

The failed Southern California grocery workers' strike of last spring is a case in point. Almost 70,000 UFCW were prepared to fight the bosses to the finish. They struck for 138 days with a militancy, power, unity, and determination that had not been seen in some time. But they were betrayed, not only by their own leadership, but by the very union, the Teamsters, that the SEIU today sees as its likely future partner in forcing either a new leadership in the AFL-CIO or some structural changes that would transfer more

money to the pockets of SEIU and IBT bureaucrats for dubious purposes.

UFCW grocery clerks effectively walked out or were locked out of every major supermarket in Southern California. But the bosses had their own secret, or not so secret, weapon. They counted on the Teamsters to cross the UFCW picket lines, as they had done for decades. The Teamsters obliged.

Formally, Teamster drivers did not cross UFCW lines. They simply drove company trucks to within eyeshot of the struck stores and left the last few score yards to scab drivers and/or company agents.

Yes, the Teamsters did respect UFWU pickets when they showed up at the distribution centers for a few days. But this was for show only. After the fake solidarity display was over, the Teamster could claim that the UFCW officialdom ordered the pickets removed, allowing them to continue their scabbing.

This charade has been repeated for decades; the scenario shifts here and there depending on which of the two unions is on strike and which will be allowed to cross the lines.

But let's say for the sake of argument that the Teamsters did respect UFCW lines. The bosses would have had no way to deliver food and related store goods in one of California's most powerful industries.

No doubt the bosses would then seek a court injunction and cite some law or regulation or contract provision banning solidarity and mandating scabbing.

Again, let's assume for the sake of the argument that the two unions ignored the injunction, as their forefathers and sisters did when America's industrial unions were built in the first place. The bosses would then mobilize all the scabs they could in the rest of the country to insure the continued operation of the struck stores. This too they have done throughout the course of the history.

But let's assume that the two struck unions called on their sister and brother IBT and UFCW

unionists in the rest of the area to join the picket lines and use some friendly persuasion on those who tried to take the jobs of the striking workers. No doubt the bosses would call in the police in large numbers and even the National Guard to help escort the scabs through the picket lines. Any they would get even more injunctions against those union locals who had left their jobs to defend the jobs of their comrades.

Now the strikers would call on the AFL-CIO area central labor councils to come to the aid of the strikers and close down the entire area. Could they do it? That is, do workers today have the raw power to shake the bosses to their marrow?

Absolutely. First, the Teamsters, joined by the union railworkers and the union (ILWU) longshore workers, and the bus drivers and construction workers and all the rest would cease work. Nothing in the area would move! No highway would function other than the traffic allowed by the multi-union strike committee to support the strike.

Would there be enough cops or National Guard soldiers to stop them? Perhaps the Democrats and Republicans would respond by threatening legislation banning the right to strike, like they have done in the rail industry under the Railway Labor Act? Yes, they would threaten this too. But by now it would be clear that there was a real fight going on and all of labor would be drawn in.

The strikers would bring their case to the entire working class—to the 90 percent who have no union.

"Come and join us," they would say, "and we will do the same for you and help you build your own fighting unions everywhere. Or, you can join ours!"

The above scenario is not based on any structural changes in the existing labor movement. It requires no new laws or theories of organizing. It requires little or no money since the resulting solidarity would insure that no striker goes hungry. There would be no union members who would turn off anyone's electricity or gas. There would be no evictions since no

police or sheriff's deputies would even attempt such a move.

Union power, working-class power more generally, is the simple cure for what ails the labor movement today.

The only obstacle to a workers' victory today is the union mis-leaders themselves, including those in the SEIU and IBT, not to mention the AFL-CIO.

They can be expected to move heaven and hell to thwart the kind of working-class rebellion that is required to remove them from office and take on the bosses.

They have already virtually eliminated almost all aspects of democratic control of the unions. With each new merger, the most reactionary

aspects of the old bylaws and constitutional provisions are maintained and strengthened.

Today's labor fakers are the bosses' best insurance against a resurgent rank and file. But when workers come to understand that the employers and their government cannot be defeated without a real fightback, they will also discover among themselves the kind of leadership that is required to meet the challenge. As in the past, the old-guard leaders will be discarded in the course of struggle, union formalities or not. That's history's fundamental lesson.

The SEIU has done working people a service by at least raising the issue of labor's present dilemma. It has called for a "bold discussion at all levels in the labor movement." Let the discussion proceed!

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